

Security at Crossroads 2: Boundaries and Life

A report

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On 4th November 2024, Calcutta Research Group (CRG) organised the second webinar of its series, “Security at Crossroads”. In the episode titled “Boundaries and Life”, CRG sought to explore various facets of human security at the margins. Decolonising the security question and relocating it within the ambit and issues of life - life of the nation, people, and in particular lives of vulnerable population groups relegated to a bordered existence, the webinar asserted that the issue of security lies at the crossroads of rights, justice, and vulnerabilities. The important questions that the webinar sought to answer were - how do the lives in spaces of exceptional dwelling such as camps or borderlands constitute our understanding of security institutions? How do the need for dialogic justice and its principles and practices emerge out of ethnic conflicts, resource conflicts, and derogation of rights? How do borderlanders negotiate with the legality/ illegality- security/ insecurity conundrum, navigating multiple forms of control, regulation and freedom? Changing laws, VISA regimes, border infrastructure, markets and corridors change and modify the lives of borderlanders. What are the changing nature and insecurity of borders that also produce (in)security for people in the borderlands?

Unlike the first webinar which offered a view from India, this one, in keeping with the proposed exercise of forming an interdisciplinary yet interconnected network, examined three sites that offer unique yet connected facets of securitisation and human security: EU, central Asia and the South-eastern border of Bangladesh. Anticipating difference, the webinar discussions nevertheless yielded a series of commonalities, further enhancing the importance of a network that connects global and local concerns together. Some of the commonalities that emerged were the imposition of borders as security apparatuses, undermining historical ties and connections, arising from the assumption that borderlands must be spaces of conflict and violence. Border infrastructure

Paula Banerjee

*** Critique of Traditional Security Paradigms:**

Security is often defined narrowly as the absence of insecurity.

This perspective prioritizes national security over individual security.

The Complexities of Borders and Borderlands:

Borders are simple lines, while borderlands are dynamic and multifaceted spaces.

Borderlands are characterized by cultural, economic, and social exchange.

Borderlands are not exceptional spaces but have existed alongside states.

Paolo Novak###

EU Border Management and Humanitarian Border

The securitization of migration in Europe since the 1990s, framing migration as a security concern.

Introduced the concept of the "humanitarian border," highlighting the tension between security and humanitarian principles.

Emphasized that border management exceeds migration concerns, involving broader circulation management and resource allocation. Border control is colonial,

both connects and divides, modernising but also, recreating identities. Borders merit a rethinking of how states are constructed, especially when the peripheries indicate interests which are different from that of the centre. The webinar also emphasised the importance of approaching the question of security vis a vis human insecurity globally, with the curious example of humanitarian EU borders, where security concerns go hand in hand to keep refugees out while rescuing European fishing folk.

The moderator of the panel, Paula Banerjee (Asian Institute of Technology) discussed the complex relationship between security and insecurity, highlighting how security is often defined in opposition to insecurity, with national security typically prioritized over individual security. "Borderlands," as a region presents a unique challenge in understanding security. While a border is a clear line, a borderland is a liminal space where the territories of two states meet, making division difficult. The concept of borderlands is evolving beyond just physical boundaries to include mental, cultural, and food-related borders. Life in borderlands is diverse, with various movements and activities—ranging from the migration of animals to human interactions that involve crossing, subverting, or being criminalized for crossing borders. Paula challenged the perception that borderlands are exceptional spaces, arguing instead that they have always existed alongside states and should be understood as a normal, not exceptional, part of life.

Paolo Novak (School of Oriental and African Studies, London) presented his recent theoretical considerations of the humanitarian borders in EU. William Walters and others working on humanitarian border management highlight the complex interplay between security and human rights in managing migration. This approach is particularly evident in the context of "mixed migration flows," which include refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and potentially criminals or terrorists. Policymakers aim to distinguish between those needing protection and those perceived as threats. The concept of humanitarian border management, as defined by organizations like the IOM, balances sovereignty and security with the protection of human rights. This "uneasy alliance" results in policies that treat irregular migrants both as threats and as victims to be saved,

#Anita Sengupta# ## Central Asian Borderlands

Fergana Valley (in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan), a region with intermixed populations and mismatched modern borders, offers an interesting perspective that contradicts moder securitisation discourses.

Discussed the impact of state-imposed borders on traditional ways of life and the commons.

Highlighted the difference between state narratives of security and the lived experiences of borderland dwellers.

###Shafqat Munir###

Bangladesh-Myanmar Border

Addressed the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis and its impact on local communities.

Critiqued the over-securitization of the refugee issue and the lack of focus on human security.

Discussed the challenges of managing borders amidst the Myanmar civil war and the implications for Bangladesh.

embodying a duality captured by Claudia Arradao's framing of migrants as both risks and at risk.

Examples in the European context illustrate this tension. Militarized search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean aim to save lives while securing borders. Simultaneously, asylum reception centers combine humanitarian principles with mechanisms of control and surveillance, marginalizing asylum seekers despite formal rights protections.

Border management extends beyond migration and security to broader concerns of circulation and resource allocation. EU agreements with countries like Turkey and West African nations illustrate how migration policies intersect with trade, resource extraction, and geopolitical arrangements, reflecting colonial continuities. Finally, borderlands—spaces shaped by these policies—are sites of constant contestation, negotiation, and resistance by both migrants and non-migrants. This highlights the pervasive and dynamic nature of borders and their implications for decolonizing security and migration discourses.

Anita Sengupta (Asia in Global Affairs) discussed the case of the Fergana Valley, shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, exemplifying the tension between modern national borders and traditional borderland lifestyles. Historically, its diverse populations shared land, resources, and cultural practices across fluid boundaries. However, with state intervention and the securitization of borders, the valley has become a contested space, with mismatches between ethnicity, territory, and citizenship fuelling a state narrative of danger to justify authoritarian governance.

For borderland dwellers, closed borders disrupt their daily lives and traditions, in contrast to the state's focus on sovereignty and security. In Osh, a Kyrgyz-Uzbek frontier city, ethnic divides have deepened since 1999, with hardened boundaries and increasing nationalism. This has led to segregation and localized identities, yet moments of solidarity, such as mutual protection during conflicts and community events like Navroz, highlight efforts at reconciliation. These borderlands also swerved as commons, a crucial contribution to the security/insecurity discussion in the borderlands, which enables the thinking of the borderlands as resource, and the construction of hard, modern borders as an undermining of the same commons.

Discussion, Questions and Responses

The discussion included comments on the humanitarian aspects of border management, the role of women in border communities, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of security that includes human security.

Meghna Guhathakurta contributed insights on the strategic role of women in border areas and the importance of addressing both refugee and host community needs.

Questions from participants touched on issues such as the division of commons by borders, the situation of Afghan refugees, and the potential for progressive policy changes in Bangladesh regarding the Rohingya crisis.

Using two narratives from two communities, Sengupta demonstrated the unique location of the Fergana valley in historical imagination and identity formation. One citizen of a Tajik village, whose home lies just meters from the border with Kyrgyzstan said, “Tensions will rise the day I am asked for my passport just to visit my relatives in Isfara, a journey that involves crossing in and out of Kyrgyz territory twice. Why should I have to carry a passport with me as though I were a thief or a lawbreaker when I actually live here?” Another person, a resident of the Kyrgyz village commented on the putting up of posts for the first time in 100, operating under the presumption that borderlands must necessarily be spaces of ethnic conflict and violence, not peaceful cohabitation. With modern infrastructure projects like proposed rail links and highways aiming to enhance regional connectivity and economic development, fostering growth across the borderlands, the Fergana valley is likely to see further changes, as well as challenges.

Shafqat Munir (Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies) wanted to talk about the Bangladesh- Myanmar border, in the context of the continuing hosting of refugees by Bangladesh. The narrative surrounding the Rohingya crisis is dominated by security concerns, often sidelining human security aspects. This narrative persists, with figures like Professor Yunus (the head of the current government) referring to the situation as a "ticking time bomb." Bangladesh's approach reflects this perspective, particularly its reluctance to provide broader education to Rohingya refugees beyond the Myanmar curriculum, aiming to discourage settlement and future influxes.

Additionally, the focus on the Indo-Bangladesh border overshadows discussions about the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, despite its significance. The border with Myanmar, particularly its proximity to the Rakhine and Chin states, faces challenges from the spillover of Myanmar's civil war, impacting local communities and schools. However, this "forgotten frontier" receives far less attention than the Rohingya crisis or issues along the Indo-Bangladesh border. The Myanmar state, centered in Naypyidaw, has limited control over border regions like Arakan and Chin, which are largely governed by non-state actors. This poses a critical dilemma for foreign policymakers: should they engage with the formal Myanmar state or directly with non-state entities? This challenge reflects the constraints of the Westphalian framework, which prioritizes state-centric interactions but struggles to address realities on the ground. The ongoing civil war in Myanmar has significant cross-border implications, akin to India's experience during the 1971 Bangladesh crisis. Although the scale of the current refugee crisis is smaller, its security repercussions for neighboring regions are substantial, highlighting the interconnected nature of such conflicts.

Apart from highlighting aspects of human security with special emphasis on borders and borderlands, this webinar also enabled us to identify themes that have engaged audience attention across the two webinars. These include a strong emphasis on justice for marginalised and vulnerable populations, and a recognition of the insecurities that are produced by the functioning of states in the name of security.